

"Rooted and Grounded in Love"

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¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:14-21)

This has been an odd week for me in the wake of sharing with you the news that I will be taking another call to a different congregation. Many of you have been very gracious in the ways you have reached out to me, but I have also heard some sadness and disappointment. I don't think anyone really enjoys making another person sad. I certainly don't. So, as I said, it has been an odd and difficult week for me, and perhaps for you, too.

That is why I am so thankful that God arranged for this particular scripture to come up in the lectionary this week. In the context of the letter to the Ephesians, this passage is a prayer — a prayer that is offered by a pastor for a church that is close to his heart. In the first few chapters of the letter, this pastor has talked a lot about what the church of Jesus Christ is. The church, he says, is the vehicle for God's effort to unify all things under Christ. The church is a new covenant community... a new humanity... a family of diverse people who are brought near to God through forgiveness, grace, and love. In this new family, the walls of hostility that divide the rest of the world have come down. Church, in the letter to the Ephesians, is an amazing gift to the people of God.

Over the coming months, as you prepare for the next chapter of ministry here, I expect that you will be thinking a lot about these kinds of things. In other words, you will be wrestling, once again, with the question of what "church" is for you. Together, you will discuss how you have experienced community here... how you have encountered God here... how you have sought to serve God and others here. Eventually, the conversation will move to where you hope to go... and what kind of church experience you want to offer to the world.

In 2016, the Pew Research Center conducted a very revealing study of American churches. They discovered that nearly one-half of all Christians in the United States have switched church membership at some point in their adult lives. Of those who switched, only about a third had moved because of a relocation. That means that two-thirds of the moves took place within the same town or neighborhood. These were people who moved for "social reasons," "practical reasons," or, to use the language of the survey, "problems with old church." Whatever their reasons were, these people decided to go "church shopping," and the research is pretty clear on what they were shopping for. According to the survey, the things people look for most in churches are (1) the quality of sermons (83



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percent), (2) a feeling of being welcomed (79 percent), (3) worship style (74 percent), and (4) church location (70 percent).¹ None of these variables surprised those who conducted the study.

What did surprise them, however, was a factor that was not on the list. The organizers of the study expressed concern that there was no indication that the church-shoppers had “a desire for personal spiritual growth in a gospel-centered, mission-driven, discipleship-oriented church.” What they saw in the data was “that an essential, if not *the* essential, need of members is a pastor who can deliver a soul-soothing message week after week.” “At worst,” the study concluded, the data indicates that churches may be losing focus by looking at people not as disciples and servants of God, but rather as *consumers*.

Now I will be the first to say that churches cannot and should not turn a blind eye to the needs of their members. But I would agree that the church can quickly veer off course when it begins to see members as customers... or when the people in the pews start to view the ministry of their church as a service industry that is there solely to cater to their individual needs and desires.

It reminds me of those famous words from the inaugural address of President John Kennedy. As he called on the American people to devote themselves to what he called the “responsibility” of freedom, and as he expressed the hope that the energy and passion of our citizens might create a glow that could “truly light the world,” he urged us onward with the memorable phrase “Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.”² Imagine what we could do as the church of Jesus Christ if we took the same approach to membership and discipleship... if we concerned ourselves not so much with what the church can do for us, but what we can do for the church.

I am excited to say that this kind of spirit seems to be on the rise in this congregation. Just this week, one of you called Lynne and said, “I have some time. How can I help? What can I do?” And when she gave him a suggestion, he just said, “OK, I’m on it.” That same spirit was what made the Church Street Market such a success, and the same spirit is fueling interest and action in our new Prayer Room. Amazing things are happening here, simply because people are not asking what the church has done for them, but what new things they might do in the name of the church.

I think that is exactly what this pastor of old had in mind when he offered this prayer for his congregation in Ephesus. It is a prayer offered for people who have known the church, who have valued the church, and who know that God’s presence and salvation is still very much alive in the church. So this pastor prays that these people would continue to grow in spiritual depth... that they would continue to delve with passion and courage into the spiritual mystery of God’s love.

And it is a mystery. Even in this prayer, the end and goal of the prayer is cloaked in uncertainty. If you look at verses 18 and 19, which are really the heart of the prayer, you can see what I’m talking about: “*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*” What is he praying for? The breadth and length and height and depth of what? What thing do we need to know the dimensions of? We are not told. And perhaps that is purposeful, because

¹ <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2016/consumer-driven-church>

² <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Quotations/Inaugural-Address.aspx>

the hope is that we would know a kind of love that “surpasses knowledge.” It is not something that can be grasped and measured. Only explored with faith and devotion. For it is in the searching and the hoping that we are filled... and not only filled... but “filled with all the fullness of God.”

If we want to know what people are really shopping for, it is that. They might not know that’s what they are looking for. It might not be the answer they give on some survey. But it is what we really need. It is what we all need. And that is why I hope you will all embrace this idea of the Prayer Room. Yes, I think it will bring some new people into our walls. But as I see it, the success of that space not a function of how many people will come. It’s not a question of how many “customers” we might have, or how attractive it makes us look to church shoppers. That prayer room is about seeking spiritual depth. It is about finding new ways to be “rooted and grounded in love.” It is about creating a space of peace and reverence where disciples of all kinds can go about the critical work of looking for “*the breadth and length and height and depth*”... of searching for that “*love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*...” and striving mightily to “*be filled with all the fullness of God.*”

As he passed the time in his prison cell, having been arrested by the Nazis for his resistance of the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a considerable amount of correspondence to his friend and student, Eberhard Bethge. In one letter from 1944, written in February as Lent approached, Bonhoeffer remembers with fondness some of his most inspiring worship experiences. “If you have a chance of going to Rome during Holy Week,” he tells his friend, “I advise you to attend the afternoon service at St. Peter’s on Maundy Thursday.” He also recalls a Greek Orthodox service that had moved him deeply. Or, he said, “if you happen to be on Monte Pincio towards sunset and are near the Church of Trinitá del Monte, do see whether the nuns are singing just then; I heard them once, and was very impressed.”³ His body was trapped in an ugly cell, but his mind and his spirit roamed free, and as Bonhoeffer’s imagination played through the highlight reel of some of the most awe-inspiring worship experiences of his life, these disparate fragments were woven together into hopes and wishes that he shared with his friend.

The letter then turned to lament, as he mourned the craziness of wartime Europe. Life had become so fragmented, he said, so splintered into little parts, that no one could seem to make any sense of it anymore. Even so, Bonhoeffer could see rays of hope in the little fragments of our lives. In the same way that little slivers of his worship memory had been recalled and rewoven into something meaningful to his friend Eberhard, Bonhoeffer imagined the disparate fragments of our lives pointing the way toward deeper, eternal, shared meaning.

As he pondered this mystery, he recalled a musical work that Johann Sebastian Bach never finished, *The Art of Fugue*. That work was a study of a single musical fragment or subject, which was then ordered into contrasting variations of point and counterpoint. It was like this one musical snippet was turned over and over, like a diamond in a beam of light, to see where the beams would go. Bonhoeffer saw it as a metaphor for human life. Some fragments of our lives “are only worth throwing into the dustbin,” he said, while others have importance that lasts for centuries. Only God, he concluded, can sift through

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison (New Greatly Enlarged Edition)* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 218.

them, draw out the most meaningful pieces, and weave the tiny fragments into a meaningful tapestry.⁴ Only God, he said, can make sense of the repeating and sometimes broken themes of our lives and somehow “weld them into a harmony in which the great counterpoint is maintained from start to finish.” When we finally arrive at a place where we can perceive God doing this in our lives, then, Bonhoeffer says, “we will not bemoan the fragmentariness of life, but rather rejoice in it.”⁵

Even in a Nazi prison, even in the absurdity of his life in that moment, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought to bring those little fragments of meaning that all of us experience into the presence of God, so that God could make music out of them.⁶

And he wanted the same spiritual blessing for his friend. So go, Eberhard, go to Rome. Go to the great cathedrals of Christendom. Listen to the music of nuns singing. Soak in the vision of the setting sun on the Pincian Hill. Seek the depths of God’s Spirit, and give yourself freely to its influence, because church is not just a service provider. It is, rather, a conduit for a living prayer, an embodied, fleshed-out prayer, which claims the same hope that an ancient pastor once offered to the Ephesians, and that this pastor now prays for you:

*¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. **Amen.***

⁴ *Id.*, 219.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015), 417-8.